

BERNARD SOMSEN IN WARTIME

by Gree van Daatselaar-Somsen [53]

World War II. Nearly sixty years later..., and yet the stories and events are still so alive and nearby. Even more nearby when your own family is concerned, your own father, and then you simply cannot get past those stories without getting emotionally involved. Being proud and sad at the same time.

*And with such feelings **Ida Heinen-Somsen** [455] came to me. She acquainted me with the war and resistance history of her father **Berend Hendrik Somsen** [367], called Bernard, 1913-1993.*

The history took place in Eibergen between 1940-1945.

I shrank back from writing this down. I would have to enter into that period and that is difficult for me. In each family so many things happened at the time. I was a young teenager in those days, but you felt the fear, tension and pressure of your parents. You were not supposed to know everything and that was the most alarming element.

This has left behind impressions that I will be aware of for as long as I live.

But still.

Ida persuaded me with her warm smile, her beautiful scrapbook about her father and...with a delicious homemade ginger cake.

Come with tales tonight

Three books about Eibergen in wartime, written by *E.H.Wesselink*, published by the Historic Circle of Eibergen, bear the title '*Come with Tales Tonight*'. The title has been borrowed from the lines of a beautiful poem, entitled **Peace**, by the Dutch and American poet Leo Vroman. The story about Ida's father **Bernard Somsen** can mainly be found in the chapters 5 and 8 of part I.

Here is an abstract with an emotional tinge:

The Dutch Jews were deprived of almost all their rights in the first years of the war. They had no money, no property and later no roofs over their heads. Hunted game. Prey to the annihilation of Hitler.

The Jewish community of Eibergen consisted in 1940 of approximately thirty people. They had completely assimilated to the Eibergen community and had all sorts of trades. Some Jewish families had already lived in Eibergen from 1800. They had a synagogue of their own and also a rabbi.

In 1942 it started getting very dangerous for the Jews in Eibergen. They were to be transported to the concentration camps and, therefore, had to go into hiding. They had to find a hideout in some secret place that as few as possible people knew. But where? And with whose assistance? Hiding Jews was severely punished and in the last few months of the war capital punishment was even possible.

Yet the Jews had to find some sort of hiding-place. Good patriots with strong principles, who took part in the resistance, found hideouts for them at the risk of their own lives. In small attics, in haystacks, sheds and cellars. They always had to be silent. They could not come out and they were not allowed to trust anyone.

In several places in Eibergen Jews were hidden and taken care of. Not even the neighbours were allowed to know about it. **Bernard Somsen** and



l.-r.: Ida Somsen-Koens [368], eldest daughter: Gesina [449] en Berend Hendrik Somsen [367]

his young wife offered shelter to Jewish people. His stepfather J.B.Nijman did the same. (Bernard was only 2 months old when his father Berend Hendrik Somsen [344] died. Later his mother remarried J.B.Nijman.)

In March 1943 the Nazis were combing Eibergen. There was one razzia after the other. Several Jews and their helpers were found and carried off. There was fear and stress, fury all around, powerlessness and deep sorrow. When they did not find all the people they were looking for the occupying forces became more and more fanatic and sly.

The den

The Jewish brothers Bram and Herman Maas had decided not to report to the Germans. They had ordered wood for a shed in the field where kept their sheep. This shed was to be built of boards that could be taken apart. The shed, though, was not built in the field but in the Hoones wood, where it was built underground, to



The den, outside



The den, inside

serve as an underground shelter. Soon it turned out to be too small and had to be added to. With the permission of the owner of the land and the brave assistance of many people 20 cubic meters (ca. 600 cubic feet) earth were moved away with spades and wheelbarrows. All this took place in absolute silence and in strict secrecy and it was all well camouflaged. At first the shed was meant for five hunted inhabitants but soon there were more. And in the most perilous days at the end of March there were twenty Jews in twelve square meters (ca. 200 square feet)! They thought they were safe...Was it betrayal or was it carelessness?

Sunday, 28 March, 1943

It was quiet in the Hoones wood. It was said that there were shots in the night. But in the morning all was quiet again.

On that Sunday morning on March 28 the church

services in Eibergen had not finished yet.

There was a shiver in the village. A message went from mouth to mouth: 'The Germans have raided the den and have transported all the Jews'. Only Herman Maas, 23, got away because he had just been getting fresh water from a nearby ditch. He smelled a rat, heard the shouting of orders. Motionless he lay on the ground till dark. The hatch of the den had been left open, probably for the necessary fresh air. Had this been fatal?

In the Reformed Church the bad news was spread, whispering, by the sexton. Bernard Somsen, white as chalk, dashed out of the church and rushed home, he had to try to find a safe place for his wife. For seven of the Jews who had been caught had been in hiding in his house and in his father's house. The Germans were ruthless. It was impossible to foresee what might happen.

**Give shelter to those in distress
and do not report those who are adrift.**

Isaiah 16:3b.

Outside Bernard saw the German soldiers and watched them with great fear turn into the Grotestraat. Clacking boots, the shouting of orders, rifles at the present, triumphant grins. The people of Eibergen, where the church services had just finished, watched this scene with great horror. Well-known faces and figures. Nineteen Jews on the way to their end. Heartrending!



*Johannes Bernardus Nijman reads aloud
from the Bible*

They were never to return. After the war it was found out that they had been deported to the gas chambers of Sobibor, Auschwitz and Buchenwald.

While Bernard and his wife were on their way to Neede to go into hiding, his father J.B.Nijman was arrested. After having consulted his wife Ida, Bernard decided not to leave his 65-year-old father alone. This was brave and very loving, but also very risky. He went back home where he was arrested the following day.

Without a trial or a judgement the prisoners were transported to the concentration camp in Vught on April 1. A very notorious and much feared camp with a place for executions and a crematorium.

Free

J.B. Nijman was released on 1 October on his wife's birthday, after having been imprisoned for half a year. What a relief and what happiness! But when would Bernard come home? At home they were poised between hope and fear.

Bernard's release was most remarkable. In Vught he was ordered to work at the Moerdijk. There was a sort of branch of the concentration camp of Vught where prisoners had to dig anti-tank ditches.

When a prisoner who had just arrived heard Bernard Somsen's name he called out in surprise: 'Your name was announced in Vught and you are free!' This turned out to be really true. Only after a couple of days he was taken back to Vught because there they kept the papers for his release. Sometimes German punctuality requires roundabout routes.

But after that there was great joy in the young Somsen family. Bernard was free! Unbelievable!

This would have been a good concluding sentence. Yet a closing sentence with sad associations because of the very tragic fate of the Jewish fellow-citizens from Eibergen. And also because of the death of so many resistance people.



Monument Eibergen (detail)

'Be grateful and remember', is written on the war monument in Eibergen.

In order to be grateful and to remember the above article has been written. ■

Source: Come with Tales tonight
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Somsen Omnes Generaciones, p. 101

SEARCHING ON THE WORLDWIDE WEB

by Theo Somsen [227]

Thanks to the attentiveness of our webmaster John Howard Somsen [2353] we can facilitate your search on the worldwide web (www). That is, if you are looking for sites about Somsens or sites that are interesting to them.

<http://www.newulmareafoundation.org>

This site in the English language provides information about the New Ulm Area Foundation, founded by Henry N. Somsen [2456] in 1987 in memory of his wife Anne Duncan [2457]. About Henry N. Somsen you can find more information in our family book on the pages 146, 179 en 180.

<http://www.hoveniersbedrijfsomsen.nl>

This is the site (in the Dutch language) of the horticulturists Hennie and Paulien Somsen - Middelhuis [1861 + 3722]. Their business is located in Eibergen, Netherlands. Also thanks to them our lime-tree in IJzerlo is still flourishing.

<http://home01.wxs.nl/~adw.historie>

A Dutch site and a very interesting one of the Historic Study Group Aalten-Dinxperlo-Wisch, about which you can read more in this present issue. (page 13)